

# THE KNIGHT WHO FELL

By Alma Woodward

A ROYAL blue touring car, with bright nickel trimmings rolled under the porte cochere of the Belle Meadow Country Club and came to a halt before the carriage steps. Its occupants—a woman of middle age fashionably gowned, a slender, dreamy-eyed girl and a man radiant in the latest motoring garb—alighted, and were led to a choice corner table on the veranda.

The girl sank wearily into a roomy wicker chair and leaned back among the cushions.

"What a perfectly beautiful place to live!" she said softly. "I have never been here before."

"The man leaned forward, alert, eager to catch her every word."

"Yes, it is a good sort of place for the three summer months—service excellent and everything top notch. It's near the property I'm developing at present too—that's a very important factor."

The girl turned her large eyes upon him and her lips curled slightly at the corners.

"I was not thinking of any of those things when I said it was beautiful," she remarked, as if she were speaking to a child. "Look at the mysterious gloom of the thick woods over there, and that queer, blue shadowy line at the horizon that means hills, and the gold light on the lake!"

Kent smiled and shook his head enthusiastically.

"Oh, yes; you mean the scenery. Well, I wish you could read the boost we give it in our advertising booklets. Why, that scenery is worth fifty thousand a year to me!"

The girl looked at him curiously for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly and began to fuss with the tea service that a waiter had placed before her.

It was the mother who tried to fill in the breach.

"End is such a fanciful girl, Mr. Kent," she purred, gazing at him the while through a disconcerting lorgnon. "Her father and I tell her she is a positive anachronism. She should have lived in the time of Sir Galahad. She's all dreams and fantasy!"

Kent took the cup End was holding toward him.

"Those chaps are all right between limp leather covers, with illuminated type and gilt edges; but how long do you suppose one of 'em would last in Wall Street?"

"How long would a Wall Street man have lasted in the search for the Holy Grail?" she retorted gravely. "There are no men nowadays. There are only male creatures who appropriate the title with impunity!"

Under the scathing assault Kent quailed at first, then rallied bravely.

"Aren't you a trifle hard, Miss Foster?" he ventured at length. "Just what is your definition of a man?"

The girl leaned her slender arms on the table before her and placed her chin in the hollow of her clasped hands. Her eyes were luminous; her lips, vividly red parted slightly.

"A man," she began slowly, "is one who has the courage of his convictions and will walk into the jaws of death to realize them. A man feels himself the natural protector of all women and will court danger to shelter the sex. A man is both tender and brutal, weak and strong, with a heart that loves passionately and that hates just as passionately when any meanness or treachery shows itself. That is my definition of a man!"

She stopped speaking and looked deep into Kent's eyes. He shifted uneasily under the calm, steady scrutiny, and lighted a cigarette to soothe his nerves.

"Well," he declared finally with as much bravado as he could summon at the moment, "those chaps back in the early days had it all over us in the matter of trimmings, with their suits of mail and horses laden with gay trappings and battlements and moats and things," he finished rather indefinitely.

"Of course," Mrs. Foster chimed in between two sips of tea.

"Why?" Kent went on, warming to the argument, "just imagine a man trying to be knightlike in the middle of Broadway!" If he yanks a woman from under an automobile truck he's only a dolt, but in the old days, I suppose, they'd have put a wreath of laurel on his brow!"

The girl looked her scorn across the table and it stung.

"The qualities of a knight do not lie in woven clothes and clinking armor," she retorted indignantly. "They are embodied in the heart and soul of their possessor!"

This seemed to finish the discussion. That it should have done so there's no denying, but the man was loath to let go. He saw his heart's desire slipping from him and he reached out wildly to save it.

"Well, what can a man do nowadays to prove he's not a coward? Tell me that!" he asked meekly. "What could a man do to-day, for instance, that would seem like a deed of knightly chivalry?"

The girl threw back her head and laughed heartily, and the laugh hurt more than a sharp retort.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said easily, and consulted a tiny watch in the handle of her parasol. "If we're to be back in time to dress for dinner I'm afraid we'll have to be moving, mother dear."

Kent pushed back his chair and summoned the head steward.

"Have my car brought around, please," he ordered.

As he threw the light silk folds of the Ritz motoring wrap about her she looked up at him mischievously.

"No good ever came of trying to resurrect the dead past," she whispered, "chivalry is dead!"

He watched the car bearing his two guests vanish down the road. After it was out of sight he watched the light clouds of dust it had raised settle down to earth again.

He searched the horizon sullenly for blue lines and peered disconsolately into the woods, trying to grow enthusiastic over their mysterious gloom. He was seeking inspiration in a vague, curious way, but despaired of ever finding it.

"I beg your pardon, sir, for disturbing you, sir," the trained tones of the head steward broke in upon his meditations.

"No, Perry was looking for you an hour ago and he's just come back. Will you see him, sir?"

"Ask him to come to my room," Kent answered.

Throwing his long coat over his arm, he disappeared through the wide doorway.

Two minutes later Perry, a tall loose jointed Yankee, chief engineer of Kent's real estate firm, knocked at the door and was told to enter. Much to his delight, he was greeted warmly, even effusively. Before he had recovered his accustomed poise he found himself in a low, cushioned chair. His employer stood before him, a box of choice cigars in one hand and a flaming match in the other.

Dazzled by the luxury of it all, Perry selected a rare perfecto and lighted it. He knew that he would wake up soon, but in the meantime what was the use of letting anything good slide by?

Kent waited until he saw a cloud of fragrant smoke curl from between the chief engineer's lips.

"Before you tell me what you want to see me about I want to ask you a few questions," he began. "First, do any of the men we have working in our several gangs live near the Hemlock Terrace property?"

"Some," replied Perry between puffs. "There are two shacks on the Landon road near the creek—eight of 'em live there."

"Ah!" The word slipped triumphantly from his employer. "Now I'm going to let you into a little something, just to see of what sort of clay you're made!"

Perry stopped puffing. It sounded as if his dignity were about to be put up as a target for satirical shafts.

"What do you mean?" he ventured. Kent patted him fraternally on the shoulder and went back to his chair.

"I wouldn't tell me this, Perry," he confided in a gentle, hesitating manner. "If I hadn't the utmost faith in your loyalty and ability to keep things to yourself."

The introduction sounded well. Clearly there wasn't going to be the least thing damaging to dignity in the disclosure.

"Have you ever been in love?" asked Kent rather sheepishly.

"Sure!" Here was common ground. "I was in love with four sisters, and they all died."

The sepulchral information rather floored the president. He coughed, because he didn't know exactly what else to do.

"Yes, I've had fierce love in love," continued the puffing Don Juan. "Just as soon as I cottoned to one of 'em she'd die. There were two left and the dominie told the mother that if she wanted to keep them she'd better tie the can to me, so she did."

Kent was slightly discouraged. He had expected a somewhat finer appreciation of the soft emotion; but he realized that it was now or never.

"That's too bad—seemed a sort of fate, didn't it?" he sympathized.

"You bet! But what's the matter—you in love?" Perry accused rather than questioned.

Kent nodded.

"I'm in love with a very beautiful, sweet girl," he explained; "but she's got an idea that I'm too practical, too full of business. She wants mush and romance. That comes of reading wild tales, medieval yarns—you know!"

"Sure!" agreed Perry coolly. "Dead-End Dick, 'Rough-House Rufus,' and that truck."

"Yes," gasped Kent; "that stuff. She thinks we all ought to be around fighting duels and cutting up our fellow men, just to win a lady's favor. She's a lovely girl, you understand; but she has notions."

There were sympathy and understanding in the chief engineer's eye. His experience with the four dear departed ones had acquainted him with the fact that battle, murder and sudden death go hand in hand with love.

"Now just a minute ago," the president went on, waxing enthusiastic, "an idea came to me whereby, with your aid, I can produce the desired effect. I am helpless, though, without your aid, my dear Perry."

The humble confession, strengthened by repetition, made Perry's heart swell. He mentally tested the strength of his right arm and prepared to offer up his life, if necessary, on the altar of his employer's love.

"Suppose," Kent began eagerly, "suppose that to-morrow night, about 9:30, an automobile containing two ladies and a man should roll along the Landon road near the creek. At 9:30, those moonless nights, it's as dark as the Plutonian regions along there, isn't it?"

"Darker 'n-yes, it's fierce dark!" amended Perry.

"Well, what could be easier than a little holdup—fake, of course? Then

the man in the machine—that's me—gets up and does the bing-bing act with a six shooter, puts the highwaymen to the bad, saves the ladies and spins away—a hero! Are you on?"

Perry twisted nervously in his chair. "No; can't say that I am, cap. Give us that last once more, will you?"

Kent cleared his throat. He had it all worked out so beautifully in his own mind that it seemed stupid of Perry not to understand immediately.

"About 9:30 to-morrow night," he began again, this time painstakingly, "an automobile, containing the young lady with whom I'm in love, her mother and myself, will glide quietly along the Landon road near the creek. Just in the darkest spot the eight men you speak of, who live in shacks right there, headed by you, will hold up the machine."

"The ladies will no doubt be terror-stricken. Then I pull out my trusty gun, kill half a dozen of you, and toot toot away safely. It'll show me up great—and that's all that's necessary; after that the wedding march and orange blossoms are easy. Are you on?"

The lank one scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Yes, I'm on all right—but where do we get off?" he inquired after a moment.

"We? Who?"

"Why, the boys and me. Do we get plugged full of perfectly good lead just to do parlor stunts for the dames?"

The president hastened to reassure him.

"Only blank cartridges," he whispered.

"You boys have got to do a little acting—it's as easy as rolling off a log. Just fall down in the dust a few times, kick a little bit, and then die—a few groans might help some, and a shriek here and there. Think you can manage it?"

"If you say so sure that there'll be no target practice I guess I can get the boys to do it up brown. To-morrow night at 9:30, you say? All right, cap!"

At 9:25 the following night a royal blue touring car, with headlights strangely dim, slowed down as it neared a crossroad. Two spectral white posts pointed phantom fingers in right angled directions.

"We'll go this way," decided the one male occupant, twisting his wheel suddenly.

The girl sitting beside him laid a slender ungloved hand on his arm.

"Oh, no—that road looks so dark!" she shuddered. "Let's go the other way."

"But this is the nearest way home," protested the man. "It's getting too cool for your mother to be out. I think, besides, why do you fear when you are with me?" He said this gravely—very gravely.

The girl shrugged her shoulders slightly. It was not a disparagement of his protective virtues, but merely a sign of acquiescence. The stillness was unbroken. There wasn't even the night call of some wandering bird. Once the left wheel splashed through a black puddle and the sound seemed extraordinarily loud.

A little further on a light breeze sprang up and rustled the low bushes along the roadway with that ghostly, whispering sound that is so nearly human in the dark.

"Perhaps if you put on just a little more speed it wouldn't seem so ghostly and horrible," she urged. "I don't think I ever knew before what real darkness is!"

A faint suggestion of shallow water slipping over stones came to their ears. "The creek," explained Kent.

The words had just left his lips when a deep voice out of the gloom commanded:

"Halt!"

With a sudden wrench and a grinding of the brake the machine came to a standstill. There was a series of staccato shrieks from the tonneau, a frightened sob from the girl and a low but forceful bit of profanity from Kent.

Out from the gloom emerged figures

of blackness—silent, grim—nine in all. "Hands up!"

The dread order echoed over the fields. Two pairs of feminine hands shot spasmodically vertical.

"Put up your hands, Mr. Kent!" screamed Mrs. Foster in deadly terror. "They'll kill us—they'll murder us!"

"Put up your hands," pleaded the girl in a low tone. "For my sake, Don't!"

"Put up my hands?" echoed Kent scornfully. "Not on your life! I'll give them a run for their money! I'll show them that an American citizen won't stand for highway robbery!"

With a wild but at the same time picturesque gesture he whipped his gun from his hip pocket and fired. Full in the face of that outlaw band he fired—once, twice—again and yet again. The reports were deafening; a choking, unpleasant smoke filled the air, and through it sounded the hushed shrieks of Mrs. Foster. The girl, tense and silent, waited for the smoke to clear away—she knew the utter devastation that would be revealed!

The smoke cleared, but to her dismay, instead of prostrate, lifeless forms, she looked upon the original nine still standing in easy, careless poses—still staccato additions to the scenery. One man was whistling the "Swanee River" with variations. Then suddenly the tallest figure of the lot advanced toward the machine and, lounging gracefully on the engine, stood with his nose not three inches from the smoking muzzle of Kent's gun.

"That's all right, cap," he said soothingly. "That's all right, but just put up your gun for a minute."

The gun slipped from Kent's nerveless fingers and rattled to the floor of the car. Mrs. Foster switched to a minor key; the girl began to cry softly. The spokesman turned a pocket flash on her face.

"Don't cry, lady," he said. "We ain't going to touch you. We just want to speak to this gentleman a minute. We won't harm him. Come along, cap, right over here for a minute."

"Oh, don't leave us, Mr. Kent! We shall all be murdered! If I ever get out of this alive I'll never set foot in another automobile as long as I live!"

"I told you we wouldn't hurt him, lady. Won't you take my word for it?" demanded the man with the flash. Come on, cap."

Despite the hysterical pleading of his terrified companions, the president of the Gloria Land and Improvement Company descended from the machine and followed the nine across the road, vanishing almost immediately into the darkness. There was one last despairing shriek from the car—then silence.

Over in a dense clump of trees, lighted fitfully and faintly by the pocket flash, Donald Kent faced his chief engineer and the eight members of his concrete laying gang.

"What does this mean?" he spluttered, almost choking with rage.

Perry laid a calming hand on his heaving shoulder.

"Now, don't you go and get excited, cap," he said gently. "It's all right—everything's going to turn out all right."

"Yes," chimed in a short, thick set concrete artist. "We just got a little paper here for you to sign, and then we'll let you go, without touchin' a hair of your head."

"Paper?" repeated the president blankly. "What are you talking about?"

"Well," explained Perry, realizing that some explanation had to be made, "when I spilled off this hold up act to the boys they were only too anxious to do it. Why, they'd do anything for you, cap! Now they've been down ten hours at three sixty a day, haven't they? Well, what they want is nine hours at \$4. Surely that's reasonable, ain't it? And they just thought that this would be an opportune time to hit for it—see?"

"We knowed you was a man who liked everything neat and regular, so we got it all writ out, and Mr. Perry here brought along his fountain pen. Now you just put yer name at the end of it, and it'll all be as merry as a strawb'rry festival. Here, Tom, hold the flash for cap—he can't see to write in the dark!"

Kent leaned limply against a tall birch. The carefully nurtured Roman gladiator aspect was no more.

"The ladies'll certainly catch cold out there in that there car!" suggested one.

"Sign it an' get away at once," advised Perry. "It's the most sensible thing to do. Come on!" He held out the slip of paper encouragingly.

"Oh, I don't mind the money so much," confessed Kent, addressing himself to the engineer, "but after what I told you yesterday afternoon I should think you'd be ashamed to do this!"

Perry hung his head.

"It lay with the boys," he said.

"They're not harming you. They only want their rights, cap."

"I told you I wanted to pull off this scrap to impress the young lady. My happiness depended on it, and here you've made me look a fool, a coward, a simpleton!"

Kent's voice broke slightly; the indignity of it was simply overwhelming.

"No such thing," interrupted Perry. "As soon as you sign this we're going to put up a game fight. You'll be a hero in ten minutes, cap!"

"No, yes!" sneered Kent. "With my gun lying on the floor of the car!"

Perry extended another.

"Here's mine," he said. "I thought yours might give out. Now just as soon as you get your name written you start the scrap, and we'll chime in!"

Kent took the pen and by the intermittent light of the flash signed his name. Perry blew on the wet ink, folded the slip and placed it carefully in an inside pocket.

"Now," Perry signaled.

Kent promptly snuffed off and landed one that sang on the lower jaw of the nearest concrete modeller. Then, with a hoarse oath here and a muttered answer there, the fight was on. In the hot fury of it the jumbled mass of humanity edged across the road again to where the stalled machine stood.

Kent slashed here and batted there. His blood warmed with the glory of it as much as after man went down to the dust before his wild, unskilled blows. Then in the dimness of his consciousness, he thought he heard:

"Give him a good soak! You'll never have the chance again! Hand him one for me!"

Suddenly he found himself the centre of attraction—a magnet toward which all blows came, straight as a homing dove, with never a hint of deviation. He must surely be dreaming. Soon he would awake from this unpleasant nightmare; but in the meantime some one was carrying out those instructions to the last letter!

Finally, with a last desperate lunge, he stumbled on the step of his car and crawled to the seat, trying to stand erect. Some one accommodately cranked her up, and Kent, throwing in the clutch, with his last bit of strength discharged the contents of the six chambers at the yelling mob of nine.

About a mile further up the road he stopped his machine under a solitary ash tree and surveyed its contents. Stretched obliquely across the seat lay Mrs. Foster in a dead faint. At her feet was a crumpled mass of chiffon veils and white serge—End, also unconscious.

Weakly he reached for his pocket flask and despite his dizziness he gave two fainting females on his hands took a long, soul-reviving pull at it. He needed a brace—oh, how vividly he realized that he needed it!

A few moments later Mrs. Foster came to, and between them they revived the fainting End. Then came the crushing blow.

"Yes!" exclaimed the mother dramatically. "End fainted directly you left the car, and I fainted when the moon began to knock you around the road!"

Shades of Sir Galahad! The furious conflict gone for naught!

III.

Next morning the president of the Gloria Land and Improvement Company let himself into his private office without making a sound. His left eye would have furnished splendid material for a sketch of a Venetian sunset. His lower lip, pretty well shredded but still a lip, protruded ungracefully, and there was a network of adhesive tape on various parts of his head and face.

As he carefully lowered himself into his chair, a process that was rather painful at the moment, the door opened gently and on his crippled shins dawned the beam of a flashlight.

Every drop of blood that had survived the previous night's shelling rose to the president's face. He reached for something in his hip pocket, but it was not there.

"Won't keep you a minute, cap," whispered Perry confidentially; "but say, just between us two—last night in the scrimmage one of the boys missed his watch, an heirloom from his grandfather. It can't be found anywhere. How about it—anything doing, cap?"

With a sigh of complete surrender and a weak flutter of his vivid eyelids the would-be knight reached deep into his pocket and drew out a yellowback. Then without a word he rose carefully from his chair and led his betrayer to the door.

As the sound of vanishing footfalls came to his ears the president of the Gloria Land and Improvement Company addressed the inkwell on his desk:

"No good ever came of trying to resurrect the past. Chivalry is dead!" He stopped for a moment, then added viciously: "Yes, and last night it was cremated!"

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"Showing How It Happened"

"SHOWING just how an accident happened is sometimes a serious business," said the adjuster of an accident insurance company. "The settlement of a claim isn't made any easier by having some reckless person insist on illustrating just how the thing occurred and then losing a hand, an arm or perhaps his life, before your very eyes."

"I shall never forget an elevator accident that occurred in the early days of my adjusting. The elevator was in an old building which had been remodelled for apartments and offices."

"A tenant rang the elevator bell on one of the upper floors. As there was no response to his signal he put his head over the railing, rather work that enclosed the shaft to see if the elevator was up or down. Just then the elevator started, the heavy weights came down and crushed his skull."

"When I came to look the ground over the janitor insisted on showing me just how the man met his death. As an illustration he put his head out into the elevator shaft. Again the elevator started, the weights came down as before, and instead of one claim to settle there were two, although of course the latter one was set aside on the ground of gross carelessness."

"Another case was where a woman employed in a steam laundry had four fingers so crushed that amputation was necessary. The next day, in an attempt to show me 'just how the thing happened,' another woman lost her entire hand and amputation was necessary above the wrist."

"Nowadays when I go to the scene of an accident I say: 'Give me full particulars, show me the place and the position of the injured person, but for heaven's sake don't dramatize the accident for the sake of showing me 'just how!'"

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